

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 101BALTIMORE SUN
25 August 1985

BOOKS

Vietnam policy during the Kennedy administration

"Kennedy in Vietnam: American Vietnam Policy 1960-1963." William J. Rust, et al. Scribner's. 252 pages. \$15.95.

First, a word to Vietnam junkies. This book, too, you must have. I have seen no better, and certainly no more detailed, popular account of the years during which the Kennedy administration was groping, in varying states of hubris and uncertainty, for a policy in Southeast Asia. If you are interested only in general knowledge of the period, you can pass it up. There is little here to change any conclusions you have reached. But Mr. Rust and his colleagues have produced an account with a fascinating chronology and portraits of the principals, from the contrary, vacillating, doomed Ngo Dinh Diem to John F. Kennedy himself.

One of the most fascinating is the ubiquitous Lucien Conein, the CIA agent who appears here first in uniform as a military adviser to the South Vietnamese government. He is a constant in virtually every sweeping account of Southeast Asia during the 1950s and early 1960s, fixing, plotting, nudging a policy out of chaos when Washington could not make up its mind.

It is too bad that he did not write his own version of how it really was in that netherworld between high policy and final execution. One suspects that it would have been less colored, and more colorful, than those of the many self-serving books from other principals. This is not to suggest that Mr. Conein would have been driven by higher morality. Rather it is highly probable that Mr. Conein's standards, those of the old-style CIA adventurer, were of an order to produce a dispassionate report, and to hell with morality.

Lacking that, we have accounts such as this one to add life to the fascinating detail of the Pentagon Papers. Two themes are dominant.

One is the chronology of policy-making that led to the assassination of Diem during the coup of Nov. 2, 1963. The other is the attempt to answer the unanswerable: Would John Kennedy have swept the United States into the costly, debilitating conflict that followed his own assassination three weeks after Diem's?

Once again we have the awful sequence surrounding the Aug. 24, 1963, Washington-to-Saigon cable, which in effect was Diem's death warrant. Surely there is no clearer illustration of incoherent planning, internal division and lower-level gamesmanship in the history of U.S. policy-making on a critical issue. Most U.S. policy-makers were on vacation — including the president. Polled by telephone, they each in effect bounced one of the most important decisions of the decade to others.

Mr. Rust offers it as "my guess" that President Kennedy, had he lived, would not have done any of the things that became so unpopular later. He would "not have crossed the covert action-advisory threshold, would not have bombed North Vietnam and would not have committed U.S. ground troops to South Vietnam." That is the conclusion of most of the late President's defenders.

And I, in turn, submit that the conclusion is utterly unsupported by

the substantive evidence. In fact, such evidence is virtually all to the contrary. It is true that Mr. Kennedy worried from time to time about the deepening U.S. involvement. He wanted scenarios for getting out. Yet all of his decisions for action meant deeper involvement. Most of his public rhetoric sustained the commitment to protect South Vietnam from communism, even when its rulers were energetically kicking him in the shins.

I find it incredible that the president with one of the keenest recorded senses of personal and national glory was interested so early in cutting losses. Kennedy had authorized, in effect, the overthrow of a South Vietnamese leader of insufficient militancy. When he was assassinated, almost 16,000 American troops were in Vietnam. Does anyone truly believe that, faced with defeat at that level, he would have brought them home?

In any event, this will be one of the long-term sub-themes of the Vietnam debate. It probably is just as well. Even without answers, it ought to be useful as we consider the decisions of the future.

—HENRY L. TREWHITT

Mr. Trehwitt is The Sun's diplomatic correspondent.